

Alison F. Games. *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion 1560–1660*.

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In *The Web of Empire* Alison Games has produced a brilliant synthesis of the first century of English commercial and colonial expansion, from 1560 to 1660. She argues that in the case of the English, latecomers in the European race to secure a place in global trade networks and construct colonial empires, necessity truly was the “mother of invention.” Subjects of a weak crown financially and militarily unable either to support English commercial and colonial initiatives or to impose a centralized administration on them, English merchants and colonial enthusiasts were forced to innovate, to develop a type of cosmopolitan approach that served them well as they struggled to carve out a niche for themselves in the established world of Indian Ocean trade. Asian trade, and especially that of the Indian Ocean, had long been extremely cosmopolitan, in part due the lack of interest of Asian rulers since at least the voyages of Zheng He to impose centralized rule or hegemony upon it. The Portuguese upon entering the Indian Ocean and discovering that they had little to offer that interested the Asian markets, used force in new ways, running in essence a protection racket in the form of the *cartaz* system. Until the rise of the “country trade” in the seventeenth century, even more aggressive

Europeans such as the Dutch and the Portuguese found themselves obliged to function through trading emporia and commercial diasporas in which they might be able to use force to carve out small territorial bases for themselves, but overall they would have to work within existing trade networks and with the permission of powerful regional rulers. The English were the least able to project military power in the region and were considered interlopers even by their fellow Europeans. They were obliged as a result to develop a cosmopolitan approach in which they learned about the peoples among whom they lived and traded, accommodated cultural difference wherever possible, and thus maximized harmony and minimized conflict, especially important in order to lower protection costs in the absence of significant naval power. The result was the creation of what Games calls a “web of empire.”

This web was comprised of people and the knowledge and experience they carried with them throughout this empire, at this point an empire more imagined than material, in that for the most part it was an empire of trade rather than colonial conquest. It should be pointed out that the English were not unique in this sense: the Dutch and Portuguese both built empires comprised primarily of trade diasporas in which seasoned mariners, merchants, and travelers shared information among themselves and carried the fruits of their experiences from one end of the imperial web to another. And while Games demonstrates convincingly the cosmopolitan worldview that resulted within the cadre of English adventurers and traders, a worldview that was central to the successful development of English trade and colonization prior to 1660, the Dutch and Portuguese Empires also produced and depended upon similar cadres of peripatetic merchants and, in the case of the Portuguese, missionaries (for example, Matteo Ricci) to synthesize and disseminate the cultural knowledge essential to the creation and perpetuation of trading post empires.

Moreover, the English may have been more dependent upon cosmopolitanism than other Europeans, but they, like the Dutch and Portuguese, resorted to this approach out of weakness rather than as a coherent strategy of empire building. Everyone’s ideal model was not accommodation and cosmopolitan blending. Rather, this was the model necessary in lieu of discovering an Aztec Empire or a Potosí of one’s own. The dream was the Spanish Empire or, in lieu of that, a territorial empire where plantations of sugar or another similarly profitable product could produce fortunes for merchants and government coffers alike. There is a streak of tragedy that runs through *The Web of Empire*, as Games shows how once that dream of profitable colonial conquest became within reach for England, the English government began to impose a more centralized model in which greater government support and protection of colonial ventures came at the price of cosmopolitan accommodation. This thought-provoking book will doubtless stimulate further studies of the role of cosmopolitan accommodation in European imperial expansion.

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